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AUTHOR Moore, Duane H.
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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the factors underlying the shortage of elementary school principals. It presents the results of a survey of current educational-leadership graduate students regarding factors that would motivate them to aspire to the principalship and those factors that would discourage them from applying for the principalship. The elementary principalship has often been characterized as one of the most demanding, satisfying, and widely sought leadership positions in education. Yet, the responsibilities placed upon elementary principals are as demanding as those at other levels of administration, and a recent study by the Educational Research Service revealed that there is an increasing shortage of administrative candidates for leadership positions. Findings show that the top three inhibitors for becoming a principal are increased time commitments, the influence of outside groups, and too much bureaucratic paperwork. The top three motivating factors are a desire to make a difference, the personal and professional challenges, and the ability to initiate change. The paper offers five suggestions for change that are needed to encourage talented people to seek administrative positions: (1) restructure job responsibilities; (2) reduce the work week and the work year; (3) add support services; (4) increase the principal's authority and responsibility; and (5) nurture a cadre of future administrators. (RJM)

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WHERE HAVE ALL THE PRINCIPALS GONE?

By

Duane H. Moore, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor, Curriculum, Instruction & Leadership
Oakland University, Rochester, MI

Background

Elementary principals are key factors in successful schools, and the degree to which they meet the challenges of the next millennium will determine the degree to which schools can be effective. Rarely are there simple solutions to the many complex problems and demands inherent in the elementary principal's role. At times, the demands may seem overwhelming, the solutions difficult or impossible, and the methods that produce success in one situation may result in additional problems or perhaps even disaster in yet other situations.

The elementary principalship has often been characterized as one of the most demanding, satisfying and widely sought leadership positions in education. Frequent and significant interaction with teachers, students and parents provide elementary principals more professional and personal intrinsic rewards than possible at other levels of school administration. And yet, the responsibilities placed upon elementary principals are as demanding as those at other levels of administration. This characterization remains as true today in the 1990s as it was in previous decades. Succinctly stated, the reasons are twofold: elementary principals (1) maintain a closer working relationship with teachers, students, and parents, and therefore (2) have more continuing impact with and on instructional programs, curricula, and all operational phases of the school program than does any other level of school administrators.

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Demands are thrust upon principals from many sectors, public as well as private, each of whom consider their demands more significant than any others. Since elementary principals are so closely associated with all areas of school operation, their responsibilities and demands are visible, comprehensive and demanding.

The elementary principalship continues to change, gaining more attention as the key position in determining the success of the school. The recent trends toward higher standards as measured by test scores, decentralization of decision making for schools, combined with the move toward school-based management, places even greater responsibility on the principal. The suggestions by plaudits and pundits encouraging greater involvement of parents, the business community, and teacher empowerment require the principal to enable all areas of the educational community to assume more responsibility and assume a greater voice in school decisions. All of this must be balanced against the demand that the principal provide instructional leadership.

A recent study by the Educational Research Service, on behalf of the National Association of Elementary School Principals and the National Association of Secondary School Principals, revealed that there is an increasing shortage of administrative candidates for leadership positions in schools. Although the shortage was most acute at the secondary level and in urban settings, it is a problem across the board in all kinds of schools and districts. This is certainly no surprise to any school district that has had to seek administrative replacements lately, not only in quantity but also in quality.

Where have all the principals gone?

As a former Superintendent and presently as a professor of educational leadership I am frequently asked about the quality and supply of future school administrators. Therefore, over the past year this researcher conducted a survey of current educational leadership graduate students regarding the factors which would motivate them to aspire to the principalship and those factors which would discourage them from applying for the principalship.

Motivating Factors

The writer discovered that the highest cited motivations were the internal or psychic satisfaction one receives from one's work, such as the desire to make a difference, the personal and professional challenge, the ability to initiate change, and to have a positive impact on students, staff and the community. It appears that many of the same motivations that caused an individual to select teaching as a career in the first place are consistent with the responses to pursue a career in administration. (NEA, 1997)

The principalship, like teaching, is a service occupation. Built into the position is the idea of contributing to the lives of others and improving the educational environment for all involved. Many men and women select administration for reasons that are, at heart, humanitarian. In effect, they have a touch of the Calcutta follower of Mother Teresa. (Ryan & Cooper, 1998) I suspect that principals who are truly satisfied are people whose choice has been grounded in this deeper motivation.

Not surprisingly, increased compensation ranked below the intrinsic motivations in the survey. The financial incentives for assuming an administrative role, considering today's present salary for teachers, is very minimal given the principal's longer day and work year.

Inhibitors

The survey provided a very clear picture of the factors influencing the graduate students to not pursue a career in administration.

The number one factor was the issue of increased time commitment, not only in the length of the school year, but in the longer day. The longer day was viewed as being spent in parent meetings, committee meetings, discipline issues and community affairs. Obviously, while effective teachers spend considerable time after school hours preparing for class, they view this as autonomous time that is not controlled by others. Additional expectations -- including more consultation with teachers and with parent groups, required attendance at more school-community meetings, the tremendous workload associated with special education and other legal issues -- have expanded the school administrator's traditionally long work week. While a conscientious teacher might work 45 hours a week, the principal of 30 years ago would typically work a 45 to 50 hours a week. By contrast, modern principals often must devote 55 hours, 60 hours, or even more each week to meet the increasing demands of the job. (McAdams, 1998)

The second highest factor was the influence by outside groups into the everyday functioning of the elementary principalship. The overwhelming perception was that parents, individually and in groups, have an undue influence over the school, "the squeaky wheel, gets the grease." In addition, this factor also included the central office, which was often viewed as not delegating authority to the principal and the lack of support over issues

that are daily confronting the principal at the building level. This steady diminution of the principal's role has been accompanied by a corresponding increase in responsibility. In more and more school districts, the principal is now held directly accountable for student performance. Such higher accountability may, on balance, be an advance for public education, but the principal is caught in the classic middle-management bind of responsibility without commensurate authority.

Too much paperwork was the third highest category inhibiting the graduate students from the principalship. The perception, real or imagined, was that the state, local district and central office required too much beauracatic paperwork and red tape which in fact interfered with the "real job of the principal," which is to serve the students and staff at the building level.

Top Three Selected Motivator or Inhibitor By Graduate Students

Inhibitors

1. Increased time
2. Influence of outside groups
3. Too much beauracatic paperwork

Motivators

1. Desire to make a difference
 2. Personal/professional challenge
 3. Ability to initiate change
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What can school districts do?

As the statistics show there is a good supply of professionals, well qualified, who are completing or have completed masters degree leadership programs. However, the fact is that many are choosing not to apply for elementary principalships for the reasons cited in the survey conducted by this author.

To encourage these potential applicants, school leaders need to emulate many of the same strategies that successful corporations pursue in recruiting and retaining people for high-demand positions. Only when districts make administrative positions more attractive can they take advantage of the talent pool that is out there and secure high-quality administrators for their schools.

McAdams, (1998) provided five changes that are needed to encourage talented people to seek administrative positions. It would be well if all districts in the state of Michigan pay close attention to these suggestions:

Restructure job responsibilities. Place more emphasis on activities relating to curriculum and instruction and less on those relating to budget, legal issues, and district level responsibilities.

Reduce the work week - and the work year. School districts should adopt a more generous vacation policy. In the absence of significantly greater pay, districts should be able to use a generous vacation policy as a recruitment tool.

Add support services. Increased secretarial assistance for the principal's exclusive use.

Increase the principal's authority and responsibility. Guarantee that principals have authority commensurate with their responsibilities.

Nurture a cadre of future administrators. The local district must an ongoing process to identify and mentor capable young people and provide the support and encouragement to enable their entry into the elementary principal role.

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